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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 000324

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL GG

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: ALASANIA INTRODUCES POLITICAL TEAM,
CHALLENGES SAAKASHVILI'S POLICY DECISIONS

REF: TBILISI 168

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES A.I. KENT LOGSDON FOR REASONS 1.4 (b)
AND (d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Irakli Alasania introduced his political "team" on February 16 at a widely attended presentation event that attracted representatives of most of parties that make up the non-parliamentary opposition and garnered major press attention. The notable names joining Alasania's effort included several diplomats known to Washington policymakers -- former Ambassador to the OSCE, Victor Dolidze; former Ambassador to Switzerland and the U.S. Levan Mikeladze; and Alex Petriashvili who currently serves as Georgia's Ambassador to Turkmenistan, but also served in Georgia's Embassy in Washington. Alasania criticized President Saakashvili for neglecting democratic values, but focused his remarks primarily on policy challenges rather than criticizing the President personally. Alasania expanded on his political platform in which he called for a new economic vision based on firm guarantees of property rights. Alasania decried "militarist rhetoric" as counter-productive and said Tbilisi should focus on cooperation in economic, humanitarian, educational, healthcare, and cultural fields with the breakaway regions. Alasania spoke of the need to engage with Russia through direct dialogue while also strengthening Georgia's military. Alasania reiterated his call for new elections, but stressed they needed to be done "constitutionally". Alasania did not commit to working with any particular opposition parties saying that consultations are ongoing with various parties; but opposition politicians attending the event were quick to confirm that they were engaged in discussions with the newest figure on the opposition political scene. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Embassy Comment: Measured in tone throughout his remarks, Alasania clearly is seeking to distinguish himself from the increasingly more radical statements of his non-parliamentary opposition colleagues. Alasania, who is close to many UNM members and noted in his remarks that there are good minds both in the government and opposition, likely understands that there is little chance that Saakashvili will call for early elections any time soon. Alasania's refusal to sign the recent non-parliamentary declaration calling for Saakashvili's resignation and new elections (reported reftel), coupled with vague statements of further cooperation with opposition members indicates that he may be intent on maintaining a voice of moderation. Still, perhaps deeming it imprudent to ignore past electoral history, Alasania is cautiously positioning himself should early elections be called. Wherever Alasania's intentions lie, he focused little of his attention on President Saakashvili's personality "defects", but rather, spent his time criticizing Saakashvili's decisions and laying out his alternative policy vision. Whether or not Alasania takes off as a politician able to capture the imagination of average Georgians, his focus on policy rather than theatrics is a welcome addition to Georgian political debate especially among the non-parliamentary opposition. End Comment.

ALASANIA PRESENTS HIS TEAM

¶ 13. (SBU) Alasania held a press conference on Monday, February 16 that doubled as his official coming-out party on the Georgian political scene. He introduced his team of supporters, including former Ambassador to the OSCE, Victor Dolidze; former Ambassador to Switzerland and the United States Levan Mikheladze; current Ambassador to Turkmenistan, Alexi Petriashvili; high profile attorney, Shalva Shavgulidze; Giorgi Chikovani who was the last Georgian mayor of Sukhumi before the 1993-94 war and who served in the Abkhaz government in exile; Zurab Abashidze, who served as advisor to the Chairman of the Constitutional Court and former deputy Justice Minister from 2004-2005; Nino Goguadze who served in the Ministry of Education from 2000-2003; and Dimitri T vindiani, a doctor and founder of Aieti medical school. Alasania noted that the members represented "a team of his political co-thinkers." Although Alasania previously was reticent to set up a political party and has yet to give his movement or his team a name, he acknowledged in his remarks that his current team had the potential to grow into a political movement.

ALASANIA'S POLICY GOALS

¶ 14. (SBU) Alasania called Saakashvili's judgment into question citing the "tragic developments" of November 7, and August 2008 but largely focused on policy issues. Alasania talked about the need for a new economic vision based on property rights, business development and long term economic strategy. Alasania also talked about the need to set up

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independent arbitration to adjudicate property rights disputes between the GOG and property owners. Alasania said that healthy competition was not possible because anti-monopoly mechanisms have been destroyed. He proposed spending at least 5% of Georgia's GDP on education. While somewhat light on details, Alasania seems to understand the need to frame an alternative economic vision for Georgia vis-a-vis the UNM.

¶ 15. (SBU) While stressing certain economic themes, Alasania, a former diplomat and former Minister of Conflicts with primary responsibility for Tbilisi's relations with the separatist regions, appeared more comfortable speaking about foreign policy. He expressed his opinion that strengthening Georgia's defense capacity should become a top state priority. He stated that Georgia should develop a rapid-reaction, mobile professional arm, compatible with the armies of Georgia's international partners, as well as effective air-defense and coast guard systems. Alasania said that he does not wish Georgia to turn into an "arena of international confrontation." He said stability can only be achieved through careful, consistent, multilateral, and balanced foreign policy strategy. He criticized Russia for failing to implement the August 12 cease-fire accords, but spoke of the necessity for direct dialogue with Russia. Alasania said there could be no military solution to Abkhazia and South Ossetia saying their security concerns and national identities had to be taken into consideration into any comprehensive solution. Alasania criticized the GOG's "reckless" steps in August as having dealt a serious blow to Georgia's NATO integration, but noted that he remains firmly committed to Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

ALASANIA STILL SITTING ON THE POLITICAL PARTY FENCE

¶ 16. (C) Virtually the whole diplomatic corps was in attendance for the event as well notable non-parliamentary opposition leaders David Gamkrelidze (New Rights), David Usupashvili (Republicans), and Salome Zourabichvili (Georgia's Way). Alasania dodged the question about forming political alliances, resorting to platitudes about upcoming

consultations. He said it would become clear whether or not he would be the leader of the united opposition or not after the consultations are finalized. An NGO representative told us that David Gamkrelidze, who had earlier offered Alasania the top spot in the newly formed New Rights-Republican coalition, was not thrilled about Alasania's lack of willingness to commit to new elections or to formalize his relationship with non-parliamentary parties. However, after the presentation, Gamkrelidze told the Charge that they were regularly talking and that perhaps, Alasania, as the new face, would need the "experience" offered by the New Rights-Republican coalition. David Usupashvili who was also willing to get behind Alasania a few months ago, offered a tepid response saying he was willing to cooperate but "as he (Alasania) noted himself, this is not a business of only one person or one team. A consolidation of all forces is needed."

LOGSDON